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2-16-2012

Practical Necromancy: Raising the Dead for Fun & Profit

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Rudy, John M., "Practical Necromancy: Raising the Dead for Fun & Profit" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 153.

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Practical Necromancy: Raising the Dead for Fun & Profit

Abstract

Our profession is a unique and somewhat strange one. We are paid, fundamentally, to give voice to the voiceless. History is taking the people of the past and breathing into their lungs, letting them speak and act again even though they are long dead. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Photography, Necromancy, Death and Dying

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Photography | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Practical Necromancy: Raising the Dead for Fun & Profit

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2012

Our profession is a unique and somewhat strange one. We are paid, fundamentally, to give voice to the voiceless. History is taking the people of the past and breathing into their lungs, letting them speak and act again even though they are long dead.

If I ever write a book about historical interpretation, the title *Practical Necromancy: Raising the Dead for Fun & Profit* is tops on my list. First, what bookstore shelf-surfer isn't going to stop and let their fingers linger on the spine of *that* book? Second, it describes perfectly what we do as a craft. We are necromancers. We raise the dead. Like Victor Frankenstein, we wield the power of a modern Prometheus. But our spark of life, to make of dead and cold flesh a living, breathing being, comes not from lightning but from the human voice. Our words raise the dead, like a coy incantation coaxing them from moldering tombs.

I am not talking simply about living history and dressing in old-timey clothes here, either. The Park Ranger in her Stetson hat and grey polyester shirt telling the tale of one army clashing with another army does it. The docent at a local historical society wearing a flannel shirt and glasses on a chain around his neck, explaining what this or that was used for does it. The archivist unearthing and displaying a long forgotten letter in a new exhibition does it. We raise the dead and bring them back to life, if only for fleeting moments.

When we speak and share an ancient story of a soldier's loves and hates, his wants and needs, we are helping to reanimate his lips. He explains the world he lived in to the people of today. He helps them feel what he felt, know what he knew.

One of the amazing sources I recently came across is a letter penned by Justus M. Silliman of the 19th Connecticut. The soldier worked as a hospital steward in the months after the battle at Gettysburg. In one of his letters, he explains to his mother that he, "called on Dr. Baugher president of the college and told him my situation and desire to obtain books." The President explained that the college's, "library had been complete scattered by the rebels." The Reverend ushered the soldier into his home, to his own library and offered the man a book or to on personal loan. Silliman took, "Planetary and Stellar Worlds by O.M. Mitchell, and Footprints of our Creator by Hugh Miller," down from the shelf and brought them back to his camp.



Spooky (and very fake)!
PD / [UK Nat'l. Media Museum](http://www.uknatlmediamuseum.com)



Raising the dead for one last photo.
CC / [Paul Townsend](#)

He told his mother that a friend and he were using Mitchell's book to look at the stars. You can see them, two soldiers laid out on the trampled fields around the borough, staring into the night sky searching for the Pleiades or gazing at Betelgeuse like Ptolemy had thousands of years before. During the day, death and destruction reign supreme, as men moan and shriek and die. But lying on their backs in the darkness, the possibilities of the infinite universe unfold before two lonely soldiers, desperate for anything which might, "help to pass many hour pleasantly," versus wallowing in the hell that was Civil War.

For a moment, Justus Silliman, late of planet earth, walks once more. He speaks. His fingers leaf through the pages of a long lost book, stopping to read a passage here or there until his mind is bewildered by the sheer scale of the worlds beyond his world. He lives again. And then he sinks back into that undiscovered country from which, as Shakespeare put it, whose bourne no traveller returns.

Only he doesn't fully leave the earth. A piece of him still lives within the souls of those who felt his tale. When they look to the sky and catch a glimmering star, once again he will return. And again. And yet again. He becomes immortal in the memory of man, returned to life by a helpful oratorical necromancer and the souls they reach.